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# Embodied Minstrelsy, Racialization and Redemption in Reggae

## Abstract

This article is a case study<sup>1</sup> of a local reggae DJ (Derek) lauded for transgressing musical and ethnic boundaries and produced through discourses of racialized authenticity as flexible and heroic. While DJ Derek's ethnically stylized performance could be construed as embodied minstrelsy, other aspects of his musical capital were equally significant in the localized context and were drawn into a wider dialogue of sustainability and collective belonging defined by Caribbean migrants. I argue that ambiguous cultural figures such as Derek have an organic, productive role within local music cultures, positioned at intergenerational moments in the process of identification and belonging for ethnically diverse audiences/producers and in this case where the cultural geography of music tastes are becoming embedded within a complex set of relations among local, national and transnational cultures. It is therefore analytically instructive to examine how racist, racializing and redemptive elements intersect to produce authentically syncretic music cultures and sustain transnational identifications and belonging.

**Keywords:** authenticity; cultural appropriation; DJ Derek; popular music, representation; The Bristol Sound.

## Introduction

Questions about cultural appropriation and the representation of authentic racial identities and experience in popular culture appear to have become *more* rather than less visible in recent times. In the music field, many artists have been criticised for the incompatibility of their style, dance or genre choice because they purportedly do not match their ethnoracial identity<sup>2</sup>. Actors<sup>3</sup> have also been the subject of intense and, often abusive, public debate on social media for inauthentic or mismatched representations of identities and experience. Commenting on this recently, Kenan Malik suggests that 'the idea of cultural appropriation has moved from an abstruse academic and legal concept to a mainstream political issue' (2017). However, this increased visibility and politicisation of claims based on apparently self-evident relations of representation, identity and experience is operating in a context which is aptly defined by Rogers Brubaker as, 'a much more complex, less stable, and less easily "legible" pattern of racial and ethnic heterogeneity' produced through shifting migration and post-migration patterns, increasing rates of intermarriage and the fluid modes of identification used. Moreover, Brubaker continues to argue that, while this complexity and diversity is noted for producing ambiguities and uncertainties about the categories used to label and understand self/other identities, it appears that 'prevailing categorical frameworks' are also commonly generated (2016:418). Indeed, these recent interpretations of music and culture are attempts to reinscribe racially distinct formations and in the process are 'fetishizing cultural ownership' (Malik 2017).

Popular music research literature tends to focus on prominent music genres or high-profile artists or producers to examine intercultural borrowing and the social relations of music (see for example, Adelt 2008; Alleyne 2000; Brackett 2012; Hagstrom Miller 2010; Hamilton 2016; Hesmondhalgh 2006; Waksman 1999). One of the persistent ways in which these relations are framed is on the basis that white musicians and consumers are problematically positioned in relation to 'black' and indigenous music. Conceptually, these social relations have been framed in academic literature as 'black through white syndrome' (Hewitt 1983) or as 'white on black' cultural theft (Hamilton 2016), which is broadly understood as a continuation of 'blackface minstrelsy' (see for example Hagstrom Miller 2010; Lott 2013; Pickering 2008; Szwed 2005) – a set of cultural practices that once involved white performers 'blacking up' and performing interpretations of black or African American music and culture. 'Blackface minstrelsy' constitutes an ongoing critique of white musicians that perform or record music that is not perceived to reflect their ethnoracial heritage and thus is considered inauthentic and exploitative. Such persistence reflects the perception that white artists benefit disproportionately from cultural exchange, whereas the creative and musical labour of black and 'relatively dispossessed peoples' do not receive the same commercial and artistic rewards, despite having had 'a proportionately larger influence on global popular music' (Hesmondhalgh 2006:55-56). However, music and race are entwined in paradoxical ways that not only involve residual problems of racism, but in addition, creative ethnic hybridity (Haynes 2013), because 'from the age of slavery...musicians have 'copied, stole[n] and collaborated across the racial divide' (Hagstrom-Miller 2010:12). While the discursive and material impact of race and racialization processes are significant to understanding the social relations of cultural production, the empirical reality of musical engagement and opportunity is not reducible to discrete categories of race. Therefore, the 'complexities of music and social relations' cannot be adequately understood and explained through 'crude notions of ...cultural appropriation' (Malik 2017).

This article contributes to these debates through the profile and legacy of a *local* reggae DJ (Derek), described as having transgressed ethnoracial and musical categories. Examining the representations that produce a localised music figure enables a more intimate, yet critical, view of the experiences shaping the complex social relations of music production. This article consists of 4 sections. The next section examines how dominant racialized visions of music authenticity limit the figurative representations of the negotiation of alterity in music and ignore the potential shift in meaning of racialized subjectivities through individual experiences. Next, there is a presentation of DJ Derek<sup>4</sup> where I argue that race does not definitively explain his success. Instead, a better account for his significance can be derived from the quixotic and unconventional representation as reggae DJ underpinned by the dominant narrative of Bristol's music that both aligns with and undermines racialized music categories. The article concludes that cultural figures such as Derek play an organic, productive role within local music cultures, positioned at significant intergenerational moments in the process of identification and belonging where past music worlds embodied and experienced through older generations overlap with contemporary music production of younger generations. Furthermore, the cultural geography of overlapping music knowledge and taste available to draw on locally by ethnically diverse audiences/producers are embedded within a complex set of social relations established through the dispersal and interaction of people and music across local, national and transnational boundaries via Caribbean migration and a globalising music industry

## Music's Villains and Heroes: Producing Authenticity

Within popular music, authenticity is understood as a socially determined set of discursive conditions that produce musical subjects and communities of consumers as real or true and forms of distinction and value. Simon Frith suggests that what we should be examining 'is not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of 'truth' in the first place' (1987:261). One of the most significant ways in which it has been mobilised in this regard is to produce racialized 'truths' around musical identities and to demarcate 'black' from 'white' music. Indeed, different repertoires of racialized authenticity constitute important dimensions of what Hesmondhalgh refers to as the 'complex dialectic in the history of white borrowings of black culture, a history of homage and exploitation' (2006:70). Notwithstanding the unpredictable, messy, empirical reality of how music 'flows' through and spreads across ethnically diverse cultural practices, mediating technologies and industrial/commercial activity, attempts to establish authentic musical differences around markers of race are persistent and as Radano (2010) suggests, any such alignments are always unstable. Although the repertoires of authenticity mobilised within specific musical contexts vary, both minstrelsy and heroism tend to discursively define and limit white negotiations of music associated with black and minority groups.

### *Musical Villains*

The figure of the minstrel and the use of the phrases 'blackface' or 'blackface minstrel' has become a shorthand way of framing and disparaging white musicians and consumers who adopt music styles and practices defined as black in ways that are considered appropriative, inauthentic, exploitative, fetishistic or indeed, racist. Honey G – an *X Factor* 2016 contestant – was described as the latest white incarnation of 'blackface minstrelsy' (Okolosie 2016) for her 'inauthentic' hip hop covers. Honey G's performative style was viewed as an unacceptable parody of black culture and indicated a disregard for black British people. Is there any other way of framing her, or is white performance of hip hop covers only visible through this default lens? This use of 'blackface minstrelsy' reflects one of the dominant meanings conveyed within academic studies of nineteenth century minstrelsy which was considered to be an elaborate technique used to disguise cultural borrowing and the resulting cultural transformation of white America in the process. Minstrelsy was a process through which African American culture and experience was characterised by white entertainers in a 'carefully regulated and socially approved context' thereby avoiding perceptions of their own cultural 'degradation' in the process (Szwed 2005:85) but 'at a considerable expense to African Americans' (Tuhkanen 2001:16). Thus, the crude manner in which black experience and culture and, in particular, black bodies, were publicly degraded within nineteenth century minstrelsy in the American entertainment sphere frames contemporary social relations of music production.

However, this framing overlooks other possible dimensions of minstrelsy such as meaning reversals, hybridity, ambivalence and political resistance inextricably linked to a wider ethnic constituency of performers and audiences including African Americans. Indeed, such an acknowledgement demonstrates how it offered space for critical dialogue and as Yuval and Taylor argue, 'despite the appearance of black minstrelsy as a servile tradition, there were elements of *liberation* in it from its very beginning, and these were instrumental to its popularity' (2012: 27; original emphasis). African American minstrel performance used the same racist stereotypes 'to distance themselves' from racist images and as such, '... they were

*performing* these roles, not embracing them as representative behaviour' (Sotiropoulos 2006: 9, original emphasis). The reproduction and critique of racist stereotypes and middle-class morals suggests that within the context of nineteenth century American music culture, 'in blackface minstrelsy's audiences there were in fact contradictory racial impulses at work, impulses based in the everyday lives and racial negotiations of the minstrel show's working class partisans' (Lott 1995:4).

Writing about nineteenth century minstrelsy in Britain, Pickering suggests that although ideologically infused with problematic racist and imperial dimensions, it also constituted a type of cultural resistance to counter Victorian values and morals, '[t]he blackface mask was an acceptable prism through which Englishness could become un-English, and so allow laughter and tears to flow without moral inhibition' (2008:105). Minstrelsy therefore enabled a 'crossover between polite society and proletarian disorder and between cultural refinement and racial transgression' (2008:215). In light of both historically contextualised perspectives, far from being a one-dimensional cultural figure expressing hegemonic cultural values and racist ideology, minstrelsy was used to undermine classed and racialized forms of power. Thus, although the idea that minstrelsy is a form of racist parody remains potent within contemporary cultural imaginaries, other interpretations emphasise its 'hybrid, creolized nature' and raise questions about 'the status of nineteenth-century blackface performance as an unequivocally racist, anti-black practice, both in intentions and effects' (Tuhkanen 2001:16).

Dominant narratives of popular music's development in the twentieth century characterize high profile artists based on a narrow version of minstrelsy's racialized relations and in a way that suggests an ahistorical sense of popular music's tangled history. For example, Mick Jagger is described by Szwed as performing in a minstrel tradition 'without blackface' and thereby representing 'the almost full absorption of black tradition into white culture' (2005:85). Such characterizations of popular music through Jagger (and others such as Elvis Presley) however, imply that, as Hagstrom Miller suggests, 'an identifiable and distinct black tradition existed prior to white appropriation through an emergent minstrelsy' (2010:10). Such readings overlook how music experience and opportunities were always racially entangled through commercial and non-commercial music worlds. Furthermore, Hagstrom Miller argues that Jagger, 'illustrates the extent to which imitating black performance remained a constituent component of white identity' and thus that the reason he 'appeared transgressive' is because 'he represents the survival of the performative authenticity' emergent through minstrelsy (2010:11). In this sense, modern styles of performative minstrelsy practice are achieved without black face paint. For this reason, the phrase 'embodied minstrelsy' is used in this article as a way to distinguish traditional 'blackface minstrelsy' (i.e. with black face paint) from modern performative minstrel practice (i.e. without black face paint), where other forms of racialized embodiment such as language, accent and voice are emphasised instead of skin-colour as the major cultural signifiers of blackness. Thus, 'embodied minstrelsy' is a more accurate descriptive label.

Most characterisations of the high-profile examples introduced above tend not to examine forms of imbricating social practice and values that artists may display beyond their performance or output. Furthermore, moral and political judgements of an artist's authenticity generally tend to be made without knowledge of all of the contextual production details including the complicated historical detail about the song or genre being performed (Frith 2004). Focusing on a 'low-profile' white DJ embedded within a local African Caribbean community, whose musical *and* social worlds were brought together through reggae, demonstrates how racial embodiment of performative authenticity – by adopting Jamaican

patois – demonstrates the racist and antiracist potential of everyday cultural practices as well as the uncritical acceptance of racially discrete musical categories (see also Nayak 2003).

### *Musical Heroes*

Another dominant, yet competing, repertoire of authenticity that tends to be more prevalent in academic and industry discourse is achieved through a heroic version. For musicians that do not possess the social characteristics believed to be associated with authentic renditions of a music genre, particularly those associated with black people, other means of negotiating alterity and producing authenticity are established by using their cultural capital as a form of political and/or personal redemption. Rather than framing their musical practice as problematic and/or inauthentic, for white artists, this vision of authenticity is construed as a form of 'identity transcendence' and thus they are viewed as heroic individuals for having escaped the 'shackles of racial conformity' (Hamilton 2016:15). This 'heroic' view of authenticity is used to frame high profile rock artists such as Bob Dylan and Mick Jagger/The Rolling Stones where their whiteness is believed to have underpinned perceptions of their heroism for creatively extending themselves beyond their racialized subjectivity to embrace a form of cosmopolitan openness through music. It was also visible within the folk revival in the middle of the twentieth century led by white artists such as Pete Seeger. Hamilton suggests that in this folk revival a 'vision of authenticity' was being claimed which was not rooted in the 'dust-bowl homestead' or 'sharecroppers' shack' once associated with a previous form of folk music authenticity, but instead within self-making and rebirth. Many of those turning to folk music at this point were university educated and did not have a poor, rural Southern upbringing. Thus, as Hamilton suggests, '[i]n Seeger's telling, self-invention (or self-reinvention) could become its own authenticity, illustrating one's commitment to an identity that one has chosen, rather than what one has simply been born into' (2016:63).

There can be an ethical dimension to this self-invention also. For example, within the folk revival referred to above, part of the self-making and rebirth was to rescue 'real black music' that they thought was 'always believed to be vanished or vanishing and thus in need of preservation' (Hamilton 2016:69). Similar visions of authenticity are realised in world music where music understood to represent the 'real' South Africa or Brazil is perceived to be under threat and is thus often the music championed by the industry and preferred by consumers within Western markets (Haynes 2013). However, not all musicians are allowed to pursue such personal or political pathways to transcend established racial and musical boundaries, as some are subject to differing judgements depending on their ethnoracial background.

Black and other minority ethnic artists that have free-ranging music taste are typically considered to have betrayed their racial or ethnic group and often attract criticism. African American artists that crossed over from rhythm and blues to popular music were viewed as having 'sold out' or diluted their 'real' sound and others such as Jimi Hendrix were subjected to contradictory claims about his black authenticity or hybrid musical aesthetic (Waksman 1999). According to Hamilton, '[i]n these formulations, cosmopolitan versatility among African American artists was not heard as identity transcendence but rather as racial betrayal, in accusations that were too frequently lobbed by white critics' (2016:15). This asymmetrical racialized logic resurfaces in more recent 'post-genre' debates regarding the extent to which artists possess the same level of racial flexibility when it comes to genre experimentation or, in fact when they suggest they have gone beyond genre altogether (James 2017). Despite Bruno Mars' desire to make and perform pop music that was not thought of simply as

reflecting his racial/ethnic group, according to James, the music industry instead understood that ‘an artist who appeared to be Hispanic’ was a ‘performer of Latin music’. (2017:28). Thus, in order to avoid any ‘identity-based genre stereotypes’ and ‘being pigeon-holed as a performer of Latin music’, Bruno Mars removed his Hispanic surname (James 2017:28). It is apparent therefore that, on the one hand, visions of authenticity that reinforce the alignment of music genres and ethnoracial identities continue to constitute the social and commercial relations of music production, but not all artists and social identities are caught up in these relations equally. In light of this asymmetrical framing and mobilisation of discourses of authenticity as heroic and flexible, the next section will examine how DJ Derek was produced through the differing strands of authenticity.

## **DJ Derek**

Derek Serpell-Morris, also known as DJ Derek, played reggae and ska at Bristol’s pubs and nightclubs, and at music festivals and other venues throughout the UK and abroad. Throughout the late 1990s, a time when DJs generally began to develop an elevated cultural status (Brewster and Broughton 2006) and also when Bristol’s music culture developed a reputation for a productive, ethnically diverse and culturally progressive scene referred to as the Bristol Sound, Derek’s popularity and musical success was also ascending. His death<sup>5</sup> prompted a number of public reflections, particularly as his age, ethnicity and style challenged wider conceptions of a typical reggae DJ. Having witnessed the mixture of curiosity and warmth people had for him in the pubs and clubs of Bristol, Derek’s music legacy provides an opportunity to explore a localized example of what might otherwise have been described as minstrelsy or cultural appropriation and precisely where his career sits alongside the dominant representations of Bristol’s music culture. Representations of Derek produced within a range of British news and music media, interviews and documentaries, tend to incorporate similar interrelated elements about his musical knowledge, ethnicity, age and style. Together, through an elision of personal and professional dimensions of Derek’s life, these accounts attempt to produce an authentic musical figure that disrupts dominant localized musical ideals but affirms a racialized music subjectivity.

### *Redemption through self-invention as a reggae DJ<sup>6</sup>*

Derek’s knowledge of reggae was often referred to in published accounts of his life and career alongside acknowledgement of his vast collection of recordings (see for example, BBC 2 1994; BBC 2006; Coleman 1994; Dudson 2012; Emmanuel 2016; Lynskey 2016; Williamson 2016). Together, his knowledge and recordings created opportunity for work as a DJ in the 1970s. His first gig was at a local Jamaican pub called The Star and Garter, which had been taken over by a friend of Derek’s called Hector who, ‘[k]nowing that Derek had a great love for the music and a record collection to back it up... asked him to come down and play some of his records in exchange for a little beer money’ (Dudson 2012). The accumulation of (Caribbean) subcultural capital through musical knowledge, record collecting and the records themselves positioned Derek as a ‘reggae connoisseur’ – where both collecting and the collections themselves are ‘both public displays of power/knowledge and private refuges from the ...social world’ (Straw 1997:4) – and references to this capital were used to legitimate him as a reggae DJ within a music field that is suffuse with ideas of race and, in particular, the sounds and

history of the 'Black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993). Derek was also positioned as a local entrepreneur and became an independent supplier of music to the local Caribbean community which he sought from music stores in London, 'Having had access to the main reggae warehouse in London, he had always been first to get hold of the latest imports from Jamaica. As a result he knew what was hot and made sure he got a copy or version that no one else had then...' (Boat Mag 2012).

Becoming a 'reggae connoisseur' was also framed as a journey of self-invention and discovery. Authenticity is therefore produced through a narrative of redemption within published accounts of his life and is typically structured around a series of transitional moments when his earlier career in accountancy and marriages dissolved prompting a relocation to St Pauls, an area of Bristol with the largest concentration of African Caribbean people and noted for its levels of deprivation at that time. There are many references to how Derek embedded himself within the Caribbean community where he found his spiritual home amongst a generation of likeminded people, including how,

"He lost his home, his job, everything", says Larkin, "and the black community got him back on his feet. He was totally adopted by them". "I think he sometimes felt the odd one out", says Shirley. "And then he found all this love and affection from the black community. Maybe he felt that was more like a family for him". (Lynskey 2016).

Derek also identifies similar aspects of his life when explaining how music became a way of dealing with the loss of both parents and his marriage break-ups. Hence, refusing to relocate to Birmingham at the behest of the local Cadburys<sup>7</sup> chocolate factory where he worked as an accountant, Derek states that, '...by that time I was essentially a single man, I'd lost both my parents, marriages had crashed, so I handed in my notice and I didn't know what I was going to do' (Ujima Radio 2013).

However, explanations for his redemption through self-invention as reggae DJ extends beyond the music. Derek described how 'the music made [him] feel at home' amongst the Caribbean community with whom he shared, 'a mutual love of music and cricket' (Ujima Radio 2013) and elsewhere he suggested that, '...I loved the music and then I fell in love with the people' (Grand Finale 2008). Derek's reinvention as reggae DJ is also believed therefore to be inextricably linked to his localized experiences and community embeddedness in St Pauls illustrating how reinvention can be its own authenticity. Furthermore, Derek reflected on his musical mission by asking, 'why aren't people, my people, hearing this wonderful music that this race of people are making?' (Grand Finale 2008), suggesting there was a self-styled ethical dimension to champion reggae music from a particular era, which is reminiscent of the folksingers' musical ethics discussed above. Versions of this narrative of a personal and localized authenticity are reproduced across many sources reflecting on Derek's life in music.

#### *DJ Derek: 'The blackest white man in Bristol'*

Another more significant dimension in representations of DJ Derek that tended to immediately follow references to his love of reggae are descriptions of him as a white English man, closely followed by a reference to his performative style which incorporated Jamaican patois. Derek was described as, 'the most unlikely of Patois speaking reggae DJs' (Emmanuel 2016) and more recently described by Daddy G (from the band Massive Attack<sup>8</sup>) and cited in



the section heading above as, 'probably the blackest white man that people knew in Bristol' (cited in Lynskey 2016). Indeed, most of the published accounts focus on lauding Derek for a series of apparent musical and racial transgressions achieved through his biography, style, musical knowledge and vernacular mode of speech. For these reasons, Derek was often referred to as, '... a cult hero in the world of Jamaican Reggae!'<sup>9</sup> and there were other accounts of his legendary status demonstrated by the recognition and praise he had received from high profile reggae artists such as Toots and the Maytals. Thus, a heroic version of authenticity is discursively produced through what is perceived as a 'racial flexibility' implied by repeated references to and juxtaposition of reggae and whiteness. This heroic authenticity also manifested through accounts of his cosmopolitanising music mission where he was also described as, 'an ambassador for cultural exchange' (Daddy G cited in Lynskey 2016) and that he had transformed 'what it means to be British' (Don Letts cited in Lynskey 2016)<sup>10</sup>.

But how do we interpret Derek's adoption of Jamaican patois? Lott argues that in contemporary cultural contexts, '[e]very time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface's unconscious return' (2013:5). It is likely that some of Derek's immediate public viewed his use of Jamaican patois as problematic cultural appropriation and indeed, perhaps as racist stereotyping and caricature. However, there is no evidence of this view produced in any published account. Instead, rather than being criticised as 'blackface's unconscious return', prominent musicians and DJs describe Derek's embodiment of Jamaican patois as endearing,

I found the contrast of this bespectacled old Englishman in his cardigans and fancy waistcoats throwing down some serious Jamaican slang quite endearing, .... I don't know anyone who had a problem with it. (Don Letts, cited in Lynskey 2016)

Explanations for his vocal style appear in numerous accounts, including Derek's, although the rationale has two different emphases: one where for pragmatic business reasons he needed to better understand patois and the other was to convince people of his authenticity.

I met a Jamaican guy from Birmingham who was into promoting and sound clashes. I was expected to do the financial side of things having been an accountant.... it's a natural instinct I think anybody who's sitting with a load of people and they can't understand fully what's being said, especially when it involves money, you think I could be being stitched up here. (Grand Finale 2008)

...when I started to play in a nightclub it became a problem because you get coaches of people from Birmingham and London "Why have you got a white DJ?" on the assumption that no white man could know anything about black music. (Grand Finale 2008)

There are many similar references to the instrumental role played by his Jamaican friends who taught him patois, 'Derek was taken down to a Barber Shop ... and told to keep his eyes open, ears open and mouth shut until he was ready to say something' (*Boat Mag* 2012). These accounts do more than explain the cultivation of a Jamaican accent and patois, it shows awareness of being subject to critical scrutiny and sanction by an African Caribbean audience and local community. A similar observation was made by Les Back in research in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in London which demonstrated how white appropriation of black cultural symbols were routinely monitored and contested by black residents as part of the everyday negotiation of race and racism (1996:132). David Rodigan<sup>11</sup>, another prominent white reggae DJ, recognises the risk of being perceived as parodying Rasta/reggae music culture in his

performance when he states that, 'I don't wear the clothing of the Rastaman. I understand the culture totally...But I talk the way I talk, and I dress the way I dress. I'm a diehard reggae fan, and that's it' (cited in Burrell 2003). Thus, although Derek and Rodigan opted for different performative styles, these accounts demonstrate the intrinsic role that awareness of racialized perceptions of embodied differences – both theirs and the audience – plays in negotiating being a white reggae DJ within what is perceived as a predominantly black cultural space.

Alcoff argues perceptions of racial difference can be understood as a 'constitutive element' in 'fundamental everyday embodied experience and social interactions' and thus as a form of 'racial common sense that pervades people's understanding of the social world, in recognition that racial identity is lived in the body at particular cultural moments (Alcoff 1999:17; 19). These ideas can be drawn on to frame Derek's racialized positioning and his interactions with the African Caribbean community and audience members. Derek conveys awareness of the potential limitation that perceptions of his embodied whiteness have as a reggae DJ evidenced above and, in response, in order to sustain his musical and local identity, he embodied a Jamaican accent and incorporated Rastafarian vernacular. Thus, Derek changed his speech/bodily habits depending on the type of circumstance including those produced through perceived challenges from racialized others when performing to mostly black audiences, but also in black majority social spaces. However, in several accounts like the one below he describes himself as 'black',

I was a white DJ but albeit I hardly ever saw a white face in the venues I was playing so I wasn't conscious as a white man about this influence affecting what I was doing as a white man because although I'm white to all intents and purposes I was black.... I knew that a lot of black DJs weren't happy in the early days with going out and playing in the white places but I was so lucky I was able to merge between the two worlds ...I mean I never felt out of place even though I was conscious that I was making some people uncomfortable when I first started to mingle in St Pauls, among the black community....I think generally in the end my body language meant they didn't think I was a plain clothes or someone trying to muscle in on territory or any of this. I just became part of that scene. (Grand Finale 2008)

Comparing his DJing and musical opportunities to black DJs, Derek alludes to their less positive experiences in white majority spaces, however attempts to authenticate and explain difference invokes a racial flexibility, producing a vision of authenticity that portrays his embodied transgressions of perceptions of racial difference as convincing and eventually, non-threatening as 'to all intents and purposes [he] was black'. Should this claim be understood as reflecting the broader context of what Brubaker describes as the 'increasing complexity and fluidity of the landscape of identities' or is such a claim 'unnatural, opportunistic, exploitative, or fraudulent'? (2016:415).

Discussing the author Jack Kerouac, Alcoff suggests that his desire to get beyond perceptions of his own racialized limitations – socially produced within an historical racialized schema – is evidenced in the way he describes his encounters with African-American people and thus his recognition of disequilibrium – an 'incoherence between his felt-body image...and the body image now induced by the alienation he felt' (1999:20). The disequilibrium experienced signals some potential for transformation of perceptions of embodied racialized experience. However, rather than reorienting or eliminating the positionality of his race-consciousness and disrupting racialization processes, Derek's embodiment of Caribbean capital and subsequent claims about being black – both his and others' – suggests instead that, as a musical figure, Derek is produced through competing discourses that reinstates prevailing categorical

frameworks of race while also undermining the notion that normative racialized identities are meant to provide a fixed set of musical tastes and affinities. The emphasis on racial flexibility and heroism in accounts of Derek's musical identity is historically and discursively tied to dominant racialized repertoires of white authenticity within popular music. In answer to the question posed above therefore, the self/other perceptions of Derek, particularly those emerging from the local Bristol context where he lived and worked, attest to the complexity and fluidity of identity claims, but also suggest an opportunistic moment rather than unnatural, exploitative or fraudulent one. Thus, the empirical reality of his musical activity and identity can be understood as an embodied manifestation of the routine negotiation of local expressions of social and cultural difference that incorporate racialized, racist and redemptive tensions. Although he was able to carve out a music career by adopting Jamaican patois, the emergent music culture of the subsequent generation was negotiating and representing ethnic and music differences in alternative ways. The next section examines the influence of age and thus Derek's positioning with respect to younger and older generations of reggae fans and musicians.

### *'Britain's oldest DJ'*

The final element repeatedly used to characterise Derek is his former career as an accountant and thus that he appeared to be older than most other DJs, undermining popular perceptions of DJs by sticking to a wardrobe of cardigans or waistcoats and spectacles throughout his music career which is captured in one of the earliest published descriptions of his style.

He wears a beige shirt with toning tie, a collared cardigan under a brown jacket, and a heavy pair of specs, which stick out like joists from under the eaves of his greying thatch. (Coleman 1994)

DJ Derek was also described as...

an accountant turned club disc jockey who delighted in the title of "Britain's oldest DJ" (Williamson 2016)

a cardigan-wearing ex-accountant...(Lynskey 2016)

a 64-year-old former accountant from Bristol with a penchant for cardigans and long subsidised bus journeys<sup>12</sup>

Derek's age and sartorial choices cemented his reputation as a novelty within Bristol and the wider British music scene. Similar stylistic elements are emphasised within representations of David Rodigan described by journalist Ian Burrell as a legendary reggae DJ that, 'wears a blazer and loafers' and within the same article, Rodigan describes himself as, 'follicularly challenged' and that he resembles 'an accountant or a dentist' (2003). The similar representations of style are noteworthy, but there are significant differences in how their music experiences were nurtured and in Derek's case, it is contextually significant that he was embedded in the local Bristol community at a time when Bristol was developing a reputation for ethnically diverse, culturally syncretic and innovative music described as the Bristol Sound.

Emerging in the early 1990s, the Bristol Sound was and is portrayed as the organic product of a city at the cutting edge of musical and cultural creativity, comfortable with the ethnic diversity of its population. Academic narratives acknowledge the complex interaction between the symbolic and material facets that constitute the Bristol Sound including Caribbean migration, the interaction between different genres including reggae, punk, soul, jazz, funk and

rhythm and blues, as well as individuals (musicians, producers, promoters and DJs) and the emergence of crucial social and music venues, pubs and clubs such as the Star and Garter and the Inkerman, which are described as having had 'a great set of DJs who played roots, reggae and ska' (Webb 2005:73; see also Hyder 2014; Johnson 1996). Such narratives focus on explaining the roots of a specific moment of music in the 1990s that in turn became critical to the evolution of the Bristol Sound as a national and global phenomenon. However, despite DJing at the same pubs referred to above and his growing reputation, there is no explicit reference to him as a key figure in either academic or music press accounts that defined the Bristol Sound in the 1990s. As an older, white, ex-accountant, waistcoat-wearing reggae DJ, what role or significance did DJ Derek have within the emerging identity of Bristol as an exemplar of creative ethnic hybridity?

First, because reggae has shifting forms of value and resonance between first and second generations of Caribbean migrants (Connell 2012), Derek's emergence as DJ overlapped different musical, political and cultural sensibilities. On the one hand, he was an important figure for an older generation of Caribbean migrants as they expressed their lived experiences through the converging musical traditions of Britain, the United States and the Caribbean. This is shown in the following comment from Daddy G, who had known Derek from when he was a child in the 1960s:

"When my parents first came to England, there wasn't any infrastructure for the West Indians to integrate with English people, so they used to hold parties themselves," he says. "Derek was a real novelty to my parents because he was a white guy who had embraced their culture." (cited in Lynskey 2016)

This is the same generation that Gilroy alludes to as principally relying on their Caribbean musical heritage to not only express their cultural distinctiveness within Britain, an environment replete with 'the endless pressures of economic exploitation, political racism, displacement, and exile' but as fundamental 'in facilitating the transition of diverse settlers to a distinct mode of lived blackness' (1993:82). It is this generation that Derek professed to have a deep affiliation with because of their shared values and attitudes, 'I love the black community, particularly the first generation of immigrants, people of my age, because I can identify with their manners and their upbringing' (BBC2 1994). Moreover, the social ties to Jamaicans in the local area and the accumulated Caribbean capital discussed above enabled Derek to become a cultural and economic entity within the local context, known for the preservation and promotion of reggae from a particular era that happened to resonate more closely with this generation of British Caribbean people. Thus, Derek benefitted from and contributed to the circulation of reggae music, helping to facilitate a local music culture alongside a generation of Caribbean migrants which played an important role in the cultural and commercial potential of Bristol's music future.

Second, although there is now greater academic recognition of how 'the cultural significance of popular music is no longer tied exclusively to youth' (Bennett 2013:2), the extent to which older audience members or ageing music fans are recognised by youth as part of their immediate music scenes or cultures is less evident. However, the previous generation's music tastes and influences, including a passion for reggae, is likely to have also shaped the subsequent generation's preferences as part of their informal music education, which is also understood as a form of 'generational trading of music tastes and influences', where older listeners/audiences pass on their musical knowledge and taste to younger generations through family and friendship networks (Bennett 2013:124). While the emerging Bristol Sound was a product of an ethnically diverse youth culture, Derek indirectly participated in passing on

musical knowledge to this younger generation through their family and friends alluded to above, and directly because of his increasing visibility at local pubs, clubs and music festivals.

Derek can therefore be framed as an intergenerational musical icon within the Bristol music scene, who ensured reggae's hybrid and sonic incorporation into local interpretations of popular music in the late 1980s and early 1990s – that defined the Bristol Sound. However, he had already musically participated with an older generation of Caribbean migrants whom he was culturally and socially embedded with. Looking back on this moment, Derek is a visible figure standing between generations but not directly emergent from either. Derek's reputation and presence may have formed the discursive and practical backdrop to the broader musical and creative context of Bristol (and Britain) for latter generations of young black, white and Asian British musicians and audiences as an innovative, multiethnic confluence of sounds, culture and traditions, but he was not explicitly recognised as such within dominant *academic* framings of Bristol's culturally syncretic music scene. Nor was he identified as a key cultural figure within formal media and industry representations of the Bristol Sound in the same way other individuals and bands were in the 1990s. (Since his disappearance and subsequent death however this has changed.) The initial lack of visibility within the idea of the Bristol Sound simply affirms the dominant conceptualisation of popular music as being intrinsically led and defined by youth, particularly as music tends to be marketed by the industry towards young people (Bennett 2013; Frith, 1983). However, in spite of this, his age, ethnicity and style, which challenged mainstream conceptions of reggae and DJing more broadly, guaranteed his informal recognition and notoriety amongst musicians and audiences.

## Conclusion

Portraits of Derek produced before and after his death sought to explain a life not only lived in music but whose vocal performance style as DJ mimicked elements of reggae and rasta culture. In light of the increasing visibility of criticisms of appropriation, his Jamaican-accented DJ style might otherwise have been problematised as 'white on black cultural theft' and/or framed through 'embodied racism' – a diluted version of biological racism focusing 'on parts of the body, on phenotype or on corporeality' and that contains many of the same themes and stereotypes but lacking the systemic totality that [it] exhibited in earlier periods of modernity' (Weaver 2011:414). However, I argue that as a case study Derek provides in-depth insights into the localized machinations and 'real-life' negotiations of perceptions of racialized embodiment. Derek's incongruous presence and ongoing acceptance among the local African Caribbean community is likely to have been partially on account of his age, but initially elements of class (middle classness) and nation (quintessentially English) in his persona may have been a source of attraction as well as a reminder of the dominance (and comic absurdity) of the eccentric manners and milieu of an historically and discursively produced set of racialized colonial relations from the Caribbean (for an intimate account of such relations see Hall 2018). Thus, in addition to his affiliation with reggae music and local culture, it was his eccentric embodiment of a set of intra-white stereotypes of class and nation that also shaped his performative style. Moreover, had he not been perceived as a novelty and was instead considered to be 'mundane', Derek's musical hybridity and affection may not have produced the same 'heroic authenticity'. Thus, it is only when we have, as Alcoff argues, greater clarity about 'how race is lived...its often hidden epistemic effects and its power over collective imaginations of public space, can we entertain even the remotest possibility of its transformation' (1999:15).

By using the notion of 'embodied minstrelsy' to frame Derek's ethnically stylized accent and use of vernacular and to capture different motivations (cultural and generational affiliation, music preservation and economic opportunity), the contradictory relational dynamics were revealed. Thus, his position alongside and external to the local Caribbean community and Bristol's prominent music scene emerged through stories of his life (e.g. regarded by black audiences with suspicion early on and being taught the rudiments of patois in a local Jamaican Barbershop) and career (e.g. a legendary figure for reggae fans and community, yet no mention in academic or earlier industry/ media accounts of the Bristol Sound and whose use of patois was considered 'endearing'). Focusing on an idiosyncratic, locally embedded, musical phenomenon such as DJ Derek enables closer examination of the processes of racialization of music that manifest within the local spaces that constitute the heart of British and global popular music today. In doing so, the discussion has demonstrated therefore that it is more analytically instructive to examine how racist, racializing and redemptive elements intersect to sustain transnational identifications and belonging and to produce authentically syncretic music cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper adopts an intrinsic case study approach to Derek 'because, in all its particularity and ordinariness this case is of interest', but it also has 'instrumental case study' value (Stake 2003: 136; 137) because it enables further in-depth insight into the context and everyday activities involved in local music production.

<sup>2</sup> The following have prompted varying degrees of criticism for appropriation, Beyonce's Bollywood outfits in a music video for 'Hymn for the Weekend', Miley Cyrus twerking at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards and Pharrell Williams' native American head-dress on the cover of British fashion magazine *Elle* in 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Ed Skrein, who identifies as mixed-heritage, quit an acting role in the film *Hellboy* after a backlash from fans as he appeared to be white but was cast as a Japanese American character. Skrein's explanation was in recognition of the importance of representing the character as accurately as possible. Daniel Kaluuya, a black British actor,



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was cast in a role in a satirical film about racism in America but accused by Samuel Jackson, an African-American actor, of taking jobs from black American actors that he believed could represent American racism more authentically. For *The Guardian's* coverage see: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/08/samuel-l-jackson-criticises-casting-of-black-british-actors-in-american-films>

<sup>4</sup> Published articles about DJ Derek began to appear in November 1994 after the broadcast of the BBC2 documentary *Sweet Memory Sounds*. From this point and until his disappearance in 2015 and subsequent death, there were approximately 398 published sources in British newspapers identified within Lexis Library (by searching for DJ Derek). The majority of these (over 75 percent) were gig listings that did not elaborate on or evaluate Derek's musical or personal biography, but some of these listings briefly referenced his large collection of reggae and other music. The sample of data sources thematically analysed and referred to in the article include a range of accounts of Derek's contribution to music from national and local press as well as transcriptions of published online video interviews with Derek (*Grand Finale* 2008) and documentaries such as *Sweet Memory Sounds* (1994; BBC) and *From Dubplate to Dubstep* (2013; dir. Ujima Radio). Personal memories and critical reflections of DJ Derek's work in local pubs and other music venues in Bristol also frame the discussion.

<sup>5</sup> News of his disappearance in 2015, followed by the discovery of his body and subsequent announcement of his death in April 2016, shocked many in Bristol and around the UK.

<sup>6</sup> Derek's role as DJ combined the roles of selecting the music (selecta) and singing or rapping along to it as master of ceremonies (MC), whereas in Jamaican soundsystems there is a selector (selecta) and the DJ is referred to as the MC, 'a vocalist who toasts (raps) on the music that is being played' (Vendryes 2015:21 n1)

<sup>7</sup> Derek refers to his workplace as the Elizabeth Fry chocolate factory, but it had merged with Cadburys as far back as 1919 and by 1981 the company name Fry was no longer used.

<sup>8</sup> Massive Attack, along with Portishead and Tricky, are said to have been the three musical acts from the 1990s that put Bristol on the global map of popular music and Massive Attack in particular was credited as having laid the creative foundations of the 'Bristol Sound' (Johnson 1996).

<sup>9</sup> This was referred to in a summary of a BBC Television programme called *Inside Out* aired in 2006. See [http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/west/series9/week\\_seven.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/west/series9/week_seven.shtml)

<sup>10</sup> Don Letts is currently a BBC Radio 6 DJ with a longstanding association with punk and reggae in Britain.

<sup>11</sup> David Rodigan was born a decade after Derek but also began his career as reggae DJ in the late 1970s. His career was established more via radio work, but he also does clubs, venues and festivals both locally and internationally.

<sup>12</sup> This was referred to in a summary of a BBC Television programme called *Inside Out* aired in 2006. See [http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/west/series9/week\\_seven.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/west/series9/week_seven.shtml)